

TOUMANI DIABATE

More than any other artist, **Toumani Diabaté** is responsible for introducing the kora—a 21-string harp unique to West Africa—to audiences around the world. But aside from being a player of exceptional virtuosity and creativity, Diabaté plays a vital role as bandleader, teacher, musical conservationist and composer in the capital city of Bamako, Mali, where he was born and has lived all his life.

Diabaté is at the vanguard of a new generation of Malian griots who are constantly looking for ways of modernizing and still honoring their traditional music. He founded and directs a music school in Bamako where Malian children from different social backgrounds learn to play traditional instruments and dance. Many argue that music is Mali's greatest resource; Diabaté amply demonstrates it.

Diabaté was born in the 1960s into a family of griots: 71 generations of kora players. His father, Sidiki Diabaté (c. 1922-96), was a kora player of legendary fame in West Africa. Sidiki was named “King of the Kora” at the prestigious international Black Arts Festival Festac in 1977, and he continues to inspire countless kora players to this day. Born in the Gambia to Malian parents, Sidiki settled in Mali after World War II and became famous for his virtuosic and idiosyncratic style of playing. After Mali became independent in 1960, Sidiki was invited to join the Ensemble National Instrumental, along with his first wife (Diabaté's mother), the singer Nene Koita. Sidiki and Nene were beloved by the first president of Mali, Modibo Keita, who gave them the land on which the family house still stands, underneath the presidential palace in Bamako. This was the musical environment in which Diabaté was raised, although he was self-taught, never learning directly from his father except by listening.

A childhood illness left Diabaté with one leg paralyzed, so he has always had to walk with crutches. In a country like Mali, where there is little if any formal-sector help for the disabled, Diabaté has had to struggle twice as hard as other musicians to establish a place for himself.

Diabaté began playing kora at the age of five and was quickly recognized as a prodigy. At that time, the Malian government actively supported regional ensembles to represent local folklore, and Diabaté was recruited to the ensemble from Koulikoro (approximately 60 kilometers east of Bamako), with whom he made his public debut at the age of 13 to great local acclaim.

In 1984, at the age of 19, Diabaté joined the group of young musicians who accompanied the great diva Kandia Kouyate, the best-known female griot singer in Mali, and toured Africa extensively with her. Since this first tour outside of Mali, Diabaté has consistently toured the world, having played over 2000 concerts and participated in over 170 festivals.

Diabaté first traveled to the United Kingdom in 1986, when he accompanied another Malian singer, Ousmane Sacko, and ended up staying in London for seven months. During this period, at the age of 21, he recorded his first solo album, *Kaira*. The groundbreaking, critically lauded album was the first-ever solo kora record. It was recorded without retakes in a single afternoon.

While in the U.K. he worked informally with musicians from many different fields of music and encountered traditions that he had not previously known, such as Indian classical music, from which he derived the *jugalbandi* idea—a musical dialogue between two instruments—that has since become one of his hallmarks.

His first major collaboration, with the Spanish flamenco group Ketama, came about largely by coincidence. Diabaté had been invited to play at a party in London in 1988, and Ketama, signed to the same label, were also there. As Diabaté performed, members of Ketama began doing *palmas* (interlocked flamenco clapping) to accompany him. Diabaté was amazed at the Spanish group's intuitive understanding of the rhythmic complexities of his music. The next day they all went to journalist and broadcaster Lucy Duran's house and created what would become *Songhai 1*.

This spirit of collaboration continued with Diabaté's elaborate 1992 project with The Symmetric Orchestra, *Shake The Whole World*. Released only in Japan and Mali, the album confirmed his reputation as a maverick impressive even to purists. Diabaté explains, “The griot's role is making communication between people, but

not just historical communication. In Mali I can work in the traditional way; elsewhere I can work in a different way. Why not?"

Back in Bamako in the early and mid-1990s, Diabaté began to gather a number of exceptionally talented young musicians—such as Ba Sekou Kouyate on the *ngoni*—into with an instrumental ensemble that can be heard on his album *Djelika*. Although this was a period in Mali when synthesizers, electric guitars and drum machines were prevalent, Diabaté steadfastly held out for an all-acoustic sound, finding other ways of modernizing the music. In this period, Diabaté went to Madrid to record *Songhai 2*, which he believes to be even better than the first album.

Over the last decade, Diabaté has participated in many other recording projects, including Ali Farka Touré's eponymous debut album for World Circuit, Salif Keita's GRAMMY-winning album *Papa*, and Kasse Mady Diabaté's GRAMMY-nominated 2004 album, *Kassi Kasse*. In 1998, Diabaté recorded a kora duets album with Ballake Sissoko: *New Ancient Strings*, named after the 1970s classic made by their fathers, *Cordes Anciennes (Ancient Strings)*.

1999 saw the release *Kulanjan*, Diabaté's duo album with Taj Mahal, whom Diabaté nicknamed "Daddy Kouyate." Taj, Diabaté and six other Malian musicians—including the singers Kasse Mady and Ramata Diakite—explored the common ground between the blues and the great musical traditions of Western Mali. Taj Mahal had listened to and played with many great kora players, and had always been struck what most struck by the resemblance to the blues he heard in the plucking techniques of the kora and other Malian string instruments. To Taj, the traditional Malian piece "Kulanjan"—which he had first heard on the *Cordes Anciennes* album—had epitomized the connection.

In 2001 came *Jarabi, The Best Of Toumani Diabaté*, the first internationally released compilation of music by individual kora player, a testament to Diabaté's status as the world's premier korist. His next album was *MALICool*, a collaboration with the American free jazz trombonist Roswell Rudd that featured an interpretation of Thelonius Monk's "Hank," a swinging version of a Welsh folk song, and a version of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy."

In recent years, Diabaté has received numerous accolades for his contribution to the development of the kora, and as a key figure in African music overall. In 2003, he received the Tamani d'or, a prize awarded to the best kora player in the world. In 2004, he garnered the Zyriab des Virtuoses, a UNESCO prize awarded at the Mawazine Festival organized by King Mohammed VI of Morocco. Diabaté is the first black African ever to receive that prize.

Toumani Diabaté has been taking steps to help preserve the legacy of traditional kora music in Mali, and to educate future generations of their rich musical heritage while encouraging them to explore the creative possibilities within music. He is President/Director of Mandinka Kora Productions, which actively promotes the kora through workshops, festivals, and various cultural events. Diabaté is also a teacher of the kora and of modern and traditional music at the Balla Fasseke Conservatoire of Arts, Culture and Multimedia.

Diabaté has entered into another creatively fruitful period. He reunited with Ballake Sissoko for a track on Sissoko's new album, *Tomora*, and also appears on the title track of Salif Keita's latest recording, *Mbemba*. Diabaté started working with World Circuit/Nonesuch in 2004 on the Hotel Mandé Sessions trilogy of album recorded by Nick Gold at the Mandé Hotel in Bamako. The first release from these sessions, the duets album with Ali Farka Touré called *In the Heart of the Moon*, was released to worldwide critical acclaim in 2005 and won the GRAMMY for Best Traditional World Music Album. The second release in the series is *Boulevard de l'Indépendance*.

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